

A NIGHT OF TERRORS.

BY EMILE ZOLA.

[Translated for THE WORLD by J. C. Currier.]



I name is Louis Robiou. I am seventy years of age. I was born in the village of Saint-Jory, a few leagues from Toulouse, up the Garonne.

For fourteen years I struggled with the soil to earn my bread. Comfort finally came, and last month I found myself the richest farmer in the neighborhood.

Our house seemed blessed. Happiness dwelt within it. The sun was a brother to us and I do not recollect a single bad harvest. There were nearly a dozen of us on the farm in those happy days; myself, still buoyant and merry, accompanying the children to work; my younger brother, Pierre, an old bachelor, and formerly a sergeant in the army; and my sister Agathe, who lived with us since her husband's death, a portly and cheerful woman whose laugh could be heard to the other end of the village.

Then came the rest of the brood; my son Jacques, his wife Rose, and their three daughters, Aimee, Veronique, Marie. The first was married to Cyprien Bonisson, a tall and good-natured man, by whom she had two children, the one two years and the other ten months old. The second had lately been betrothed to Gaspard Rabuteau; and the third was so comely and accomplished that she would pass for a city belle. This made ten in all.

I was not only a grandfather, but a great-grandfather. When we were at table I and my sister Agathe seated at my right, my brother Pierre at my left, while the children completed the circle, being ranged according to their ages, a row of heads gradually growing smaller, down to the ten-months-old baby, who was already eating soup like a man.

And when they began the meal, what a rattle of spoons in the plates! The brood were hearty eaters. And what fun and jollity between each mouthful! What a glow of pride and joy I felt run through my veins when the little hands reached out to me, "Grandpa, some more bread, please; a big piece, grandpa."

Ah! those happy days! Our busy household was vocal with songs of joy. Pierre in the evenings invented games and related stories of his campaigns.

On Sunday Aunt Agathe made shuffleboards for the girls. Then there were more songs that Marie knew and which she sang in angelic tone. She looked like a saint with her blonde hair flowing around her neck and her hands folded on her lap.

I had intended to add another story to the house when Aimee and Cyprien would be married, and I used to say laughingly that we would have to add another after the marriage of Veronique and Gaspard, so that the house would end by touching the skies, if we were to continue adding to it at every marriage.

We did not like to leave the old homestead. We would rather have built a village in the garden behind the house. When families agree it is so pleasant to live and die where one has grown up.

The month of May had been unusually fine this year. For a long time there had not been such a promise of an abundant harvest. One day I took a walk around my farm with my son Jacques. We started about 8 o'clock. Our meadows on the banks of the Garonne spread out clad in the brightest green; the grass was three feet high, and a willow planted a year before was already putting forth its sprouts.

We then visited our grain crops and vineyards—fields purchased year by year according as our wealth increased. The wheat fields and vineyards were in full bloom and gave promise of a splendid yield.

Tapping me on the shoulder, Jacques burst into a joyous laugh, as he exclaimed: "Well, father, we shall want for bread and wine no more. You have surely won the favor of the Almighty, when he pours down such blessings on your lands."

We often joked pleasantly in referring to our past privations. Jacques was right. I must indeed have won the favor of some saint on high, or of the Almighty himself, for we were the luckiest of all the people around us. When a hail storm came it stopped just at the boundary of our fields. If our neighbor's vineyards were blighted ours seemed to be surrounded by a wall of protection.

In the end I came to imagine that this was only just. Having never injured any one, I began to feel that this happiness was my due. Returning home we crossed some land that we owned on the other side of the village. Some mulberry plantations were thriving admirably and some almond trees were in full bloom. When we should have money enough to spare we would purchase the intervening fields, and so connect and round off all our lands.

Chattering gaily as we went concerning our good luck, we soon reached home. One of our cows had added to the number of our stock while we were away. Everybody rushed out to see the new arrival. Aunt Agathe hurried forward despite her portly form. The children gazed at the little visitor curiously. And we all thought that this little creature's coming was another added blessing. We had lately enlarged the stables, that now housed about 100 head of cattle, besides a large number of sheep and horses.

"Come," I exclaimed, "this is a lucky day. We will open a bottle of old wine on the head of it."

Just then Rose took us aside to tell us that Gaspard, Veronique's betrothed, had come to decide on the wedding day. She had kept him for dinner. Gaspard, the oldest son of a farmer of Moranges, was a tall youth of some twenty years, and known throughout that portion of the country for his prodigious strength. At a fete in Toulouse he vanquished Martial, the Lion of the South. But for all that he was as retiring and bashful as a child, and blushed every time Veronique looked him straight in the face.

I told Rose to call him, as he was in the yard helping the servants to hang out some clothes after a big wash.

When he entered the dining-room, where we were sitting, Jacques turned towards me and said: "Speak, father."

"Very well," I answered. "So you have come, my boy, to fix on the great day?"

"Yes, that's it, Pere Robiou," he replied, his cheeks crimsoned.

"You need not blush, my boy," I continued. "If you wish it shall be on Ste. Felicite's Day, July 10. My poor dead wife's name was Felicite, and it will bring you good luck. Well, is it settled?"

"Yes, on Ste. Felicite's Day, Pere Robiou," whereupon he shook Jacques and myself by the hand with a heartiness all his own, and



THE FUGITIVES STILL DASHED WILDLY ALONG THE ROAD.

then he embraced Rose, calling her mother. This stalwart youth with the formidable face loved Veronique more dearly than his life, and he often told us if we refused her to him he would never survive it.

"Now, then," I resumed, "you must stay for dinner. To the table every one. I am weak with the hunger."

There were eleven of us at the table that evening. Gaspard had been placed beside Veronique, and he used to sit looking at her between times, quite forgetful of his plate, and so happy in being near her that every few moments the tears welled into his eyes. Cyprien and Aimee, who had been only three years married, smiled. Jacques and Rose, who had been housekeeping twenty-five years, seemed more grave, though once in a while they, too, could be caught exchanging furtive glances of tenderness. As for me, I seemed to grow young again in watching those two lovers, whose happiness threw a halo of Paradise around our table.

Ah! what a joyous repast we had that evening! Agathe, always ready for a laugh, perpetrated several jokes. Then our gallant Pierre ventured to relate one of his love affairs with a young lady of Lyons. Luckily this was at dessert when every one was talking at once. I had brought up from the cellar two bottles of old wine. We all drank to the good luck of Gaspard and Veronique.

Good luck with us meant never to quarrel, to have plenty of children and acquire riches. Then we had some singing. Gaspard sang several love songs in the patois of the province, and Marie was finally asked to sing a hymn. This she did standing, in a soft mel-low voice that ravished the ear.

By and by I went over to one of the windows, and Gaspard having joined me I said: "Is there anything new in your neighborhood?"

"No," he answered. "There has been some talk of the heavy rains for the past few days, and many people think that they will cause great damage."

"In fact, a few days before it had rained for sixty hours without ceasing. The Garonne was greatly swollen since the evening before, but we had confidence in it, and so long as it remained within its channel we could not consider it a bad neighbor. It rendered us such valuable services. It was such a broad and smooth expanse of water. And then people are not inclined to abandon their

"No, no," I answered. "The leaves do not even stir."

In fact, the entire country to the furthest boundary of the horizon was as calm and peaceful as usual. But I had scarce ceased speaking when an exclamation burst from us all. Behind the fugitives, among the groves of poplars, in the midst of the tall herbage, we suddenly saw what appeared to be a huge mass of grayish and spotted wild beasts advancing with an appalling roar. From every side they came, wave chasing wave, in galloping confusion, a mass of foaming waters, seething, boiling, flinging their white crests in the air and shaking the earth in their furious onset.

We in our turn uttered the despairing cry: "The Garonne! The Garonne!"

The fugitives still dashed wildly along the road. They could hear the rushing waters gaining on them at every stride. The waves now advanced in one long, seething line, tumbling and crashing like the thunderous din of an army closing with the enemy. Under the first shock three poplars were snapped to pieces, their tall foliage sinking and disappearing in the foamy waters. A board hut was engulfed; a wall crumbled to pieces, and carts and wagons were swept away like wisps of straw.

But the waters seemed above all to pursue the fugitives. At a turn of the road, where the ground was low, the waves suddenly rushed in, forming a vast sheet of water and completely cutting off all retreat. Still the frightened group dashed on, splashing through the rising sea with giant strides, but no longer shrieking, although mad with terror. The waters had reached their knees. A huge wave now flung itself on the woman who was carrying the baby. Both were swallowed in an instant.

"Quick! quick!" I cried. "We must get into the house—it is solidly built, and we have nothing to fear."

But prudence compelled us to seek refuge in the second story. We made the girls go up first. I insisted on going up last myself. The house was built on a hillock that overtopped the road. The water now overtopped the courtyard and continued to rise. But we were not much alarmed.

"Bah!" exclaimed Jacques, to reassure the little company. "It will be nothing, after all. You remember, father, how some years ago the water overflowed the courtyard just like this. It rose a foot and gradually subsided."

"Still, it will be very hard for the crops," muttered Cyprien.

"No, no, it will amount to nothing," I replied, on seeing the fearful, beseeching eyes of the women. Aimee had put her two children to bed, and in company with Veronique and Marie, was seated beside the pillow. Aunt Agathe talked of mulling some wine that she had brought up to revive our drooping courage. Jacques and Rose were standing together looking out of the window. I was at the other window, with my brother, Cyprien and Gaspard.

"Come up," I called to the two servants who were splashing about in the yard. "Do not let the water be all wet."

"But the cattle," they cried, "are frightened, and will kill themselves in their stalls."

"No, no; come up at once. We'll see to the cattle and by."

The rescue of the cattle was impossible should the disaster continue to increase. Still, I thought it useless to add to the fears of the company. I even forced myself to appear in the best of spirits. With my elbow leaning on the window sill, I chatted and pointed out the progress of the flood.

The river, after its first assault on the village, flooded every street and lane. It was no longer a charge of dashing waves, but a slow and irresistible effluence. The hollow in which Saint-Jory lay was now a vast lake. The water in our yard was over three feet deep. I saw it slowly rise, but I insisted that it remained standing, and I even went so far as to argue that it was subsiding.

You will be compelled to stay here all night, my boy," I said, turning to Gaspard. "But the roads may be dry again in a few hours' time." He looked at me without making any reply, his face deadly pale. I afterwards saw him fix his eyes on Veronique with a look of inexpressible anguish.

"What in the world is the matter?" asked Cyprien. "Can you see anything, grandpa?"

(To be Continued To-Morrow.)

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